

sea legs by plastiswafers

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Summary:

The thing about being stupid—and Steve is stupid, knows it with the assurance of somebody who failed his times tables enough times in third grade that they thought about holding him back, somebody who saw Nancy Wheeler carefully school her face back into nonchalance upon seeing his SAT score—is that there's supposed to be a trade off. You don't get to go to college, but you don't have to worry about it all that much either. Ignorance is supposed to be bliss. Steve had gotten used to the bliss.

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"You look like shit," Dustin says.

They're not hanging out, because Steve is eighteen years old, and he may be a dumbass whose social standing has taken a precipitous nosedive in the past year or so, but he doesn't *hang out* with middle schoolers. He might run into them outside the arcade, a place he had never voluntarily been up until a few months ago, and he *might* get trapped into conversation once that run in happens. He might elect to not be mean, to be something approaching friendly instead. But that doesn't mean they're hanging out.

"C'mon," Steve says weakly. "Don't talk like that." He's run into Mrs. Henderson before, in meetings with definitively more chance than those with her son. He thinks she might eat him alive if she thinks he's a bad influence.

"You look *really bad*, " Dustin amends. "Like you rolled a critical failure on a constitution check but the hit wasn't big enough to kill you outright."

Dustin is smart. Steve knows this too. Dustin is thirteen years old and already smarter than Steve is now. He spouts off shit that makes Steve's head spin, shit that turns out to be a Dungeons and Dragons reference only half of the time.

"Alright, big shot," Steve says. "Come back at me when you can wrangle that hairspray without me holding the brush."

Steve does look like shit. It takes a little longer to accept this than it did the stupidity, probably because it's so much further out of the ordinary. His hair remains on point, skirting to the edge of helmet head but coming down on the side of luxurious curls instead. But he has eye bags; his skin is approaching sallow. He'd picked it up beer at the mini-mart just outside of town and nobody had even thought about asking him for ID.

Jonathan Byers looks at him askance during passing period one, two, three times before stopping awkwardly in front of Steve's locker, not making eye contact but positioning himself in such a way to casually block an easy getaway. The whole setup screams Nancy; Steve wonders if she provided a diagram to assist in blocking him in.

"How've you been, Steve?" Jonathan asks, like this is a question they might ask one another. Jonathan looks...not great, but he's never looked great. Jonathan, he thinks, is a person whose beauty must be in the eye of the beholder. In the eye of Nancy, at least. Steve remembers Jonathan, tight lipped and pale, looking down at the convulsing form of a beloved younger brother, formulating plans even in a state of terror while Steve stands impotently in the sidelines. Jonathan looks better now. He looks no worse for wear—better, even. A traitorous voice tells Steve this is a consequence of Nancy as well.

Steve leans against the row of lockers like this is a super casual choice and not the result of a wave of sudden exhaustion. "Peachy," he says, and grins. His grins have always been disarming, in a good way. Jonathan is suddenly uncomfortable, and not in the way that

Steve is used to. "Baseball tryouts are such a bitch, you know? Never seen a frosh class so hopeless." He's the one averting his gaze, now. "Will doing alright?"

Steve saw Will two nights ago, dutifully being shepherded from the pizza parlor by Mike Wheeler looking at once nervous and sullen. Steve should have known he'd like Mike. It's the Wheeler way, probably.

Jonathan blinks. "He's good," he says, though it takes a moment to find the words for the sentiment. "Great, actually."

The Nancy spell has been lifted. Jonathan steps away, sheepish, like he doesn't know what he was doing there in the first place. That makes two of them. "I'll see you around, I guess."

Steve guesses.

He doesn't have nightmares. That's beyond the pale—Steve wouldn't stand for that. He'd get sleeping pills if it got to that point; his mother's bathroom pharmacy is open for business in the event it does. Dustin, Lucas, Max don't have nightmares, not that he knows of. He'd pretty sure he'd know of them if there was anything to know. Will gets nightmares, he knows, or he's heard, but that's to be expected. Kid's entitled to those. Mike does too, though Steve's less heard than suspected when it comes to that. Mike's entitled to those too. He's thirteen, for crying out loud, and he's sensitive. He's a Wheeler. He's on some higher plane.

It's easy not to dream when you're not sleeping. He's *sleeping*, of course, sometimes, or often enough. It's not some pity spiral of self-denial. It's just that sometimes it's easier to *not* sleep. Sometimes Steve sees the pool lights glowing through the gauzy fabric of his curtains and he remembers Barb, who died out there. Barb, who Steve is ashamed to admit he would sooner rather forget.

Sometimes he remembers school buses, and things pulsating underground, and preteens scrambling to get behind him so he can throw himself out in front. Mrs. Byers is there, too, with eyebags giving him a run for their money. The girl named Eleven—the *little* girl, littler, somehow, than the rest of them, who barely grazes his shoulder—who does things with a nosebleed that Steve doesn't think he could do even with a system of pulleys and levers, or even with Star Wars-level Force powers. (Dustin taught him about that last part. Chalk it up to yet another thing Steve knows jack shit about.)

In humiliating fashion, which is fitting, because Steve's life is nothing if not a steady stream of humiliation, of being rendered pathetic by children made of sterner stuff than he could ever fathom, sometimes he lies in bed and stares at the ceiling and nurses an aching jaw that conjures the phantom of Billy Hargrove's fist making a connection again and again and again.

This is when Steve sits up straight. He remembers Max, who seems the least little of all of them, by which he means she seems so young that Steve thrums with only ninety-five percent of his regular anxiety when he looks at her versus the other kids. Max lives with the creep. He'd heard later about the way she'd swung his bat and menaced Billy better than he'd ever even contemplated being able to do. He'd heard it later, of course, because of the way he'd been laid out on the floor while it was all going on, coming to only later and only to be inconvenient.

He wonders if Max stares at her ceiling and thinks about lumbering images of Billy Hargrove headed her way. He supposed she must, but it seems unlikely. She's smart, Steve thinks. She's good at some game the kids are always talking about, one he'd given one askance look before moving on.

He was their age, probably, when glow in the dark stars and moons

had littered his ceiling and given him reflections to stare at through the night. He was probably younger, come to think of it. He can't imagine Dustin, even in all his dorky glory, looking for make believe constellations to help him through the night. He'd probably pull out a star chart and critique the arrangement. Fucking dork.

They've long been since taken down. His ceiling is a sensible plain white. Steve stares, long and hard, and tries to remember where their outlines would have been. He'll sleep through first period, later, and retain absolutely nothing of a day's worth of trig. He doesn't think anyone will notice the loss.

Somebody has mentioned him to Mrs. Sinclair as a babysitting option. Dustin looks suspiciously innocent, flashing Steve a guileless look that's entirely too practiced. *Listen*, Steve wants to say. *There are better people to do this. Smarter people. People who know CPR.* She offers him a couple of bills that Steve doesn't really need, in the grand scheme of things. He lets his arm be twisted.

Lucas's little sister is off to a sleepover, but she stares at Steve from around a corner for a good forty-five minutes before she leaves. "I hate you," Lucas says, glaring daggers.

"No, you don't," Steve says breezily. Erica flushes. Lucas, to Steve's utter surprise, looks almost mollified.

The moppets pile in one after another. Steve tries to remember what he was doing at their age. Truth or dare, maybe. Spin the bottle?

Sipping at the margarita mix up in the liquor cabinet and swaggering like it was getting them drunk. Kid stuff.

These kids do not swagger. They bicker and bitch and hold each other's hands (if they're Max and Lucas, and furtively so, so delicate Steve can't let himself look directly at it), but mostly they pile up in the living room and eat enough sugar to make Steve's stomach roil and stare up in rapturous silence while the TV screen plays their favorite VHS tapes.

The significance of *Superman III* has been explained to him at least a dozen times. Dustin has run through what feels like a thousand comic back issues in excruciating detail. Steve remembers none of it, but he kind of likes Christopher Reeve. His image swims in and out of Steve's blurring vision.

"You're going to wake him up," Dustin hisses. "Shut up!"

Steve opens his eyes. He's stretched himself out across the entirety of the couch. The kids are below, in between him and the coffee table and propped up on their elbows. They are a peanut gallery staring at him in thinly veiled curious glee.

It's dark outside. "Go back to sleep," Steve mumbles. Movie credits blare somewhere in the background. "What are you doing up?"

"It's only 8:30," Will says. He sounds apologetic. Will isn't a liar, Steve knows, not when he has a choice. Movie credits blare somewhere in the background.

"Shhh," Dustin says. He's not good at being soothing, but he's getting better. "I get it now. Insomnia? Not cool. You should definitely pass out when you can get it."

Steve is passed out. He wants to fight it, but his body rebels back in kind. His mouth, on the other hand, has yet to catch up. "Babysitting," he says. "Me. Keeping you safe."

They exchange a glance, all of them, some unspoken language that must come with the territory of being prepubescent. It is a glance that does not include Steve. He tries to sit up, but Dustin's hand,

threaded somewhere in his hair, pushes him back down. Steve wants to tell him to knock it off, to not fuck up his look, but he melts back into the cushions like jelly instead.

Mike is the one that breaks the silence. “Dude,” he says. “We got it. Go back to sleep. No offense, but you really look like you need it.”

“We’re fourteen,” Max says. Steve, mashed halfway into the couch cushion, still raises an eyebrow. “Almost fourteen. We’re not kids.”

Steve thinks of demodogs and upsides down and demon possession and shit that makes his head spin, everything he can’t understand but can’t bring himself to brush off like the rest of it. It’s the things that make his chest construct. He looks at little kids arranged in a semi-circle around him, who speak of a year of painful uncertainty in the same tones they speak of their latest dumbass campaign. Steve knows the word *campaign*, he realizes with mounting horror. He wonders how long it’s been since they’ve looked at the TV screen.

Kids, man. Fucking elastic.

“Sorry,” he says.

“Shut up,” Dustin says. “I mean, shhh. Go back to sleep, Steve. It’s okay. We won’t burn anything down while you’re out.”

Steve, he thinks, is just stupid enough to believe him. His eyelids drift back closed. It’s stupid, maybe, but it’s just stupid enough for now.